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Improvement and performance support in the Fire and Rescue Service

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

At the last FSMC meeting in Gateshead, Members requested a paper to update the FSMC on the development of improvement and performance support in the Fire and Rescue Sector. This paper provides an update on the offer being developed by the Local Government Group and focuses on work underway to develop a new peer challenge process for the fire sector.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. comment on their experience of peer challenge and review how it might be improved under the new process (paragraph 9)
2. provide views on the proposal to establish a joint LG Group / CFOA working group to develop the new peer challenge offer (paragraph 10)
3. make suggestions for candidates for new member peers (paragraph 11)

Action

Officers to progress work programme subject to Members' comments.

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Improvement and performance support in the Fire and Rescue Service

Background

1. Since the Government's commitment to reduce the burden of inspection on local authorities and end the bureaucratic and centralised approach to performance monitoring, the landscape has radically changed. Consequently, public service agreements (PSAs), government office monitoring, the comprehensive area assessment (CAA) and burdens such as the use of resources and organisational assessments have been abolished.
2. This presents an opportunity for councils and FRAs to recalibrate the relationship with Whitehall and to ensure the focus of accountability is on communities rather than Whitehall departments. More than ever, given the new transparency agenda, FRAs will need to concentrate on listening to their communities to deliver effective and value for money services. Across the breadth of local government, the LG Group has long argued for sector-led improvement and that Government's right to intervene should only be triggered as a last resort in cases of extreme service failure. For fire, we have a good story to tell on this, with peer review being widely recognised as an effective mechanism for driving improvement.
3. In addition, CLG have made it clear in our conversations about national functions that there will be no Whitehall funding or resources for specific FRS assessment or support activity, so in future any such activity will need to come from the sector itself.

The Local Government Group offer

4. The Group has developed a framework for a light-touch system of self-regulation and improvement involving peer reviews, tools for self assessment and bench-marking, dissemination of good practice and brokering support where it is required. This support and assistance will not be imposed, but made available to FRAs and other local authorities to use as and when required. It seeks to build on existing activity in a way that does not impose any additional burdens on authorities but does reinforce the principle of collective responsibility.
5. A good deal of development work has now been completed to develop the LG Group's offer to FRAs. This includes a range of tools and support, including:
 - 5.1 Local accountability tools to be made available including online guidance, a new local assessment tool and support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

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- 5.2 A peer challenge offered to all authorities, free of charge, in the three-year period from April 2011.
- 5.3 An offer of up to five days free member peer support for all authorities undergoing a change of control.
- 5.4 The Knowledge Hub, launching in 2011, to provide a new web-based service creating a single window to improvement.
- 5.5 Data and transparency, enhanced by providing the LG Inform service within the Knowledge Hub to post, access and compare performance information. We will agree with FRAs a core set of metrics around cost efficiency and productivity, outcome and achievement and citizen satisfaction that authorities can, if they choose to do so, then collect, publish and use for comparative purposes.
- 5.6 Leadership support for the development of political and managerial leaders, including one subsidised training place for every authority for each of the next three years.
- 5.7 Learning and support networks of officers and councillors nationally and sub-nationally, working with others, to share good practice and provide timely support.

Developing a new peer challenge offer

6. The LG Group and the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) are working to improve the peer challenge process that will be offered to all FRAs free of charge as part of the framework set out above. The Group is in discussion with CFOA to build on the existing partnership for the Operational Assessment Peer Review programme and to establish a new peer challenge that is fit for purpose for the next three years. The new style peer challenge is designed to be solutions focused, tailored to the needs of individual FRS and to focus on their local priorities rather than on external regulatory requirements. The new approach will need to reflect capacity that may preclude the ability to undertake the full 'old style' four day Operational Assessment Peer Review. CFOA have also examined areas in which the Operational Assessment could be improved and are developing some updated key lines of enquiry for the technical parts of the review.
7. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) agreed to pilot the new style peer challenge and to share this learning to help shape and inform the offer within the FRS sector. The pilot peer challenge of SFRS in April 2011 incorporated developing thinking on the framework for the new peer challenge for councils and was tested against local corporate health priorities in a workshop in January 2011 with SFRS.
8. The pilot peer challenge of SFRS has demonstrated that corporate capacity and leadership can be included alongside a lighter-touch operational challenge. The

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offer can be highly flexible, tailored and timely to meet individual and local need within an overall framework including both corporate health and the Operational Assessment Toolkit, the current national standard for FRSs. SFRS agreed to focus on leadership, capacity and priorities, communications and relationships and organisational culture, but the review could equally be tailored to different local priority issues such as productivity or community engagement. Other FRSs have expressed interest in piloting the new approach in the autumn.

9. Members are asked to comment on their experience of peer challenge and review and how it might be improved under the new process.

Recommendations for next steps

10. In order to take this work forward, the FSMC could establish a joint LG Group / CFOA working group to look at the operational assurance needs of FRS sector and develop the peer challenge offer. Members are asked for views on this proposition.
11. One issue identified from work undertaken so far is the need to refresh the FRS officer and member peer pool and provide support and training to both new and existing peers. Members are asked to register interest or make suggestions for candidates for new member peers.

Financial Implications

12. There are no financial implications for the FSMC work programme arising directly from this report.